Why I'd Rather Shovel Coal than be A Caruso

Simple-Minded Tony with a Million-Dollar-a-Year-Voice, Brother of Rosa Ponselle, the Grand Opera Soprano, Explains Why He Refuses to Join the Metropolitan Opera House Stars

"No real man respects a tenor. I'd rather be a real man," says Tony. "I don't want my life to be one long gargle!"

Tony's Famous Young Sister Rosa, Who Is One of the Metropolitan Opera Stars.

Rosa Ponselle's Brother Tony on His Coal Cart and Her Father. Rosa Has Changed Her Name a Little—from Ponzillo to Ponselle.

Tony and His "Better-than-Caruso" Voice.

CARUSO is the most famous—and richest—of tenors. His income from his voice runs into the hundreds of thousands of dollars each year. He is courted and feted wherever he goes, receiving often, indeed—although beginning life as a butcher's boy—the honors of royalty.

Hundreds of thousands of his countrymen look upon Caruso with eyes of admiring envy.

Is there, in fact, one who doesn't?

There certainly is! Tony Ponzillo, brother of Rosa Ponselle, prima donna of the great Metropolitan Opera Company, does not. Furthermore, much as he admires Caruso's voice, he admits he wouldn't be a Caruso!

The amazing proof of Tony Ponzillo's sincerity is that while shovelling coal in Connecticut there came to him expert emissaries of that same Metropolitan grand opera on the word of his famous sister. Hearing him sing, they declared his voice as great as Caruso's in his youth, took him up to the mountain and showed him a vision of himself supplanting Caruso, and straightway offered him a princely salary to begin.

And Tony Ponzillo refused!

Surely there could be no greater proof of sincerity than that!

"I'd rather shovel coal in overalls than be a Caruso!" declared Tony.

What could be the reason for such an astonishing declaration? A representative of this magazine called upon the prima donna's brother in the Italian quarter of Meriden, Conn., to see whether he would tell. Tony Ponzillo was delivering coal close by—and in the overalls he preferred to Caruso's magnificent stage costumes. He beamed and hummed as it shot through the back drop of his delivery wagon into a patron's cellar.

"Come back to my office and I'll tell you," he said. He pointed proudly at his sign before he entered.

"I'm boss!" he remarked, cryptically. In the office was Mr. Ponzillo, his and the famous prima donna's father. The elder Ponzillo is a baker.

Was it that Tony did not like Caruso? No, he liked his voice, admired him greatly. Was it that he did not like to put on opera night after opera night the silk and tinsel, wave the sword, spout heroically about the stage?

"Well," answered Tony, "something like that. I'll tell you. Did you ever hear that conundrum, 'What's a quartette?' And the answer is, 'Three men and a tenor!'

"Yet it's not all that, either. I'll tell you. I've got a voice," said Tony. "But I don't want to strut about the big stage and be blinded by the sparklers from the horseshoe. Why should I? I don't call that living. I want to live.

"I don't want to be a slave! Nobody who is on the grand opera stage is anything else. That for such a life!" He snapped his strong brown fingers.

"When I want to sing, I sing. When I don't want to sing, I don't sing. That's the life!

"I am a business man and my own boss. Sometimes, when I can get him, I have a man work for me. I am boss; I'm not bossed.

"The grand opera tenor—he sings when he's told and rests when he's told. He goes to bed when the doctor tells him and he gets up when his teacher tells him!

"Slavery! Horrible! What money could pay for it!

"He has to dress up in a lot of fool clothes and strut along Fifth avenue to show himself off to the public. Like the minstrels and the circus that parade the street to draw folks to see the show. Only the grand opera singer, he parades by himself. It's no fun to parade alone. Such a life!

"The grand opera singer has to be fashionable. He has to go to the Ritz or the Plaza and drink tea. No real, red-blooded man likes to drink tea, any more than any red-blooded man likes to take medicine. But he drinks tea because it is expected of him that he do what society folks do. So he sits and sips tea and simpers. He acts like a fool and looks like a fool.

"Why not—when he feels like a fool?

"Such a man isn't his own master. No more than a foolish white poodle on a leash is his own master. Society! Bah! I will be no singing poodle on a leash."

Tony Ponzillo stopped to answer the telephone.

"One hundred pounds? Yes, that's all I can spare. Yes, I will bring it over myself in an hour.

"My idea of living is to work enough to make a living, but to be your own boss.

"And not work all the time. All the time the grand opera singer is working for the management. Even when he takes his beauty nap on the afternoon that he is to sing, then he is working for the management.

"I want to get up at half-past six in the morning. Not at one o'clock in the afternoon.

"I want to go hunting on a sunny afternoon, not drink tea.

"I want to tend to business and to take a little time to study with my voice when I feel like it. Not when the manager or the maestro says I must. I have a friend, Mike Sprunk. He is a stone mason and a genius. He can play and sing and compose. Only Mike won't keep at the piano. I call him in and he accompanies me. We used to sing together down in the camp in Texas.

"I don't want to take care of my voice as if it was a diamond that I might lose in the dust of the road. I want to sing when I am happy and to make my friends happy. But I don't want to make my voice a slot machine. Drop in for a note. One drops a big or little coin, according to the note.

"I don't like it.

"The nightingale don't sing that way. Nor the thrush. I don't believe the good God nor the Virgin ever wanted us to do what you call exploit the voice or commercialize it. I think it was given us to express our joy in living.

"What would I have not to do if I was to be an opera tenor! I could not eat fried food. Fried things are best. I relish them. I am miserable if I have to eat broiled meats. Most of our Italian dishes that all the world loves are fried—ravioli, potatoes, macaroni, spaghetti. Do you think I would forsake my father's national dishes to sing on the Metropolitan Opera stage? Never.

"If I should sing at the Metropolitan I could not drink a glass of beer. It is bad for the vocal chords. I was never drunk in my life, and I never will be, but if I want a second glass of beer I drink it. And if I want to pass my plate to my mother for more of her good spaghetti with the meat gravy, I want to pass my plate. I don't want to leave the table hungry for fear I'll gain a pound.

"Oh, the things you cannot do because they may hurt your throat! On days that you are to sing you must not talk. Suppose Mike Sprunk came in to see me and say he just saw the Yale game and tell me about it. Am I to sit like a dummy and say nothing? No, no, no!

"And to gargle your throat twenty times a day! Bah!"

"But the fortune your voice might earn? And the hundred and ten thousand dollars a year your sister Rosa earns?"

"What is money to a slave? My sister Rosa is a wonderful girl. She is—so we all say in the family—a miracle. She can learn in ten days what other artists need five weeks to study. There is no one else in the world like my wonderful sister Rosa. It is all right for a woman to go into a grand opera if she wants to. But it's not a man's size job.

"And another reason I don't want to go into grand opera is that when I get ready to marry I want to marry the right kind of a girl.

"If I were in opera I suppose I'd get fool notes from fool girls. Some of them from fool married women who ought to know better. They would tell me they were in love with me. Maybe at first I'd have enough sense to know that it wasn't me they were in love with, but Faust or Lohengrin, or Tristan, or some other grand opera lover. But after a while I wouldn't.

"For I've no more sense than any other man. The difference between a tenor and other men is that the tenor is adored. And if a man's adored enough he gets conceited. Every tenor is conceited.

"Another reason is that I'm a man's man. I like to slap a fellow on the back and have him nearly knock me down by a return slap. If I should be a grand opera tenor probably he would knock me down. I'd be so soft and pampered by luxury and lack of exercise that I wouldn't have enough strength to stand up against a good whack on the back.

"No real man respects a tenor. He laughs at him behind his back and thinks, 'Glad I'm not that.' I tell you there are more things worth while than money. No man laughs at me behind by back. Or, if he does, he's getting himself ready for a thrashing he'll remember.

"I want a healthy, sensible girl, such a girl as my mother must have been; such a girl as wouldn't hang around the stage door of an opera house to watch the tenor come out and gape while he clears his throat. I want enough to have a good little home and a good little wife and a good little car and by and by some good little children. What more should a real man want? That's living.

"And I'll be no slave!"

Rosa Ponselle, the sister whose rise in grand opera was so swift and surprising, played and sang in the little Meriden road house which her father kept as an annex to his bakery. For a little time she and her sister were in vaudeville. After only five months study she leaped into the place of a prima donna at the Metropolitan. Her voice is a rare quality of dramatic soprano. Tony and Rosa and the second sister, Carmela, went to public school in Meriden. Tony enlisted when the United States went to war.

"It's too bad," sighs sister Rosa, of his refusal to take Caruso's place.

"It's dreadful!" says Carmela.

"But I won't go into opera," insisted Tony as he helped the writer into a taxi. "I want to live. I don't want my life to be one long gargle! A slave to my throat—not me!"